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ABSTRACT

The relationships among three factors for at-risk adolescent Black males was investigated: internal-external locus of control, self-esteem, and parental verbal interaction. Forty-two males in Grades 6, 7, and 8 who had been identified as at-risk by their teachers completed the Locus of Control Scale for Children, the Self-Esteem Inventory, and the Verbal Interaction Questionnaire. A moderate positive relationship between self-esteem and parental verbal interaction was consistent with a previous finding for White high school students. A moderate negative relationship between locus of control and self-esteem contrasted with a previous finding of no significant relationship for Black elementary children. A weak, yet significant, negative relationship was found between locus of control and parental verbal interaction. One table of data is included. (Contains 22 references.) (Author)

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AT-RISK ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES: FINDINGS FOR INTERNAL/EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL, SELF-ESTEEM AND PARENTAL VERBAL INTERACTION

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At-Risk Adolescent Black Males: Findings for Internal/External Locus of Control, Self-Esteem and Parental Verbal Interaction

Abstract

The relationship between three factors for at-risk adolescent Black males was investigated: internal/external locus of control, self-esteem, and parental verbal interaction. Forty-two males in Grades 6, 7, and 8 who had been identified at-risk by their teachers completed the Locus of Control Scale for Children, the Self-Esteem Inventory, and the Verbal Interaction Questionnaire. A moderate positive relationship between self-esteem and parental verbal interaction was consistent with a previous finding for White high school students. A moderate negative relationship between locus of control and self-esteem contrasted with a previous finding of no significant relationship for Black elementary children. A weak, yet significant, negative relationship was found between locus of control and parental verbal interaction.

At-Risk Adolescent Black Males: Findings for Internal/External Locus of Control, Self-Esteem and Parental Verbal Interaction

Students who are at risk in America's schools have been the focus of numerous investigations, such as "Youth at Risk; Society at Risk" (Thornburg, Hoffman & Remeika, 1991) ever since the national report on the status of the nation's schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The A Nation at Risk report drew wide public attention to schools and students who were deemed "at-risk" and since the report at-riskness has become more clearly defined. "The notion of *at-risk* refers to increased likelihood over base rates in the population that a particular outcome will occur. Characteristics that increase one's risk are referred to as *risk factors*" (Kazdin, 1993, p. 129).

Many behaviors and conditions place adolescents at risk, and some groups of adolescents are considered more at risk than others. In their review, Thornburg and others (1991) found at-risk symptoms occurring more frequently among Blacks and other minority youth. They cited several educational at-risk symptoms including functional illiteracy, high dropout rates, and high unemployment for dropouts. Others who work with at-risk adolescent Black male students use similar descriptors such as: low self-esteem, lack of motivation, poor social skills, disrespect for authority, and chronic disciplinary problems (Cobbs & McCallum, 1992).

Various at-risk factors have been linked to academic achievement including locus of control, a motivational variable. "Locus of control is a generalized expectancy pertaining to the connection between personal characteristics and/or actions and experienced outcomes" (Lefcourt, 1991, pp. 413-414). Students more internally motivated believe they have more control over what happens to them than do students who are more externally motivated. In a review of 34 studies, Stipek and Weisz (1981) found students more internally controlled performed better academically, as measured by school grades and standardized achievement test scores. More recently, this relationship was noted in a study of at-risk adolescent Black males (Howerton, Enger & Cobbs, 1993).

As to whether or not a relationship exists between self-esteem and academic performance, the results are mixed (Sewell, 1985; Gaspard & Burnett, 1991). Mixed results are also reported for samples of young, Black males. No significant relationships between self-esteem and academic performance were noted by Mboya (1986) and Demo and Parker (1987). However, for adolescent Black males identified at-risk, Howerton, Enger and Cobbs (1992) found positive relationships between self-esteem and school achievement, measured by both school grades and standardized test scores.

A low quality of parental verbal interaction is an indication of verbal abuse and may be a potential risk factor. Blake (1991) developed an instrument to measure the quality of parental verbal interaction as perceived by the child.

Few studies have investigated the relationships between the three variables: locus of control, self-esteem, and parental verbal interaction. In a study of 44 Black children, Holliday (1985) found no significant relationship ($r = .03$) between locus of control and self-esteem. Blake and Slate (1993) however, found self-esteem to be significantly related ($r = .63$) to the perceived quality of parental verbal interaction for a predominantly white sample of high school students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between internal/external locus of control, self-esteem, and parental verbal interaction for at-risk adolescent Black males.

Method

Subjects

Forty-two Black males aged 11 to 16 years in Grades 6, 7 and 8 who had been identified at-risk by their teachers served as subjects in this study. They were from a rural community and had a lower socioeconomic status because three-fourths of them received free lunch at school. Most (88%) lived in a one-parent home or with a guardian. Along with the student's family status, teachers used a set of eight characteristics to identify at-risk students for the Positive Impact Program for at-risk Black males (Cobbs & McCallum, 1992): low self-esteem, lack of motivation, poor academic record, chronic disciplinary problems, poor school attendance, poor hygiene and personal-care habits, poor social skills, and a disrespect for authority.

The academic performance of these subjects has been reported in an earlier investigation (Howerton, Enger, & Cobbs, 1993). On the average, they fell 0.5 to 0.8 standard deviations below their class averages in Stanford Achievement Test results. Their grade point average was 1.85 (s=.69) on end-of-year school grades, based on a 4.00 grading scale (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0).

Instrumentation

Locus of Control (LOC). The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children was used to measure internal/external control expectancies (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). Students were asked to respond "yes" or "no" to each of 40 items. An indication of internal control would be a response which implied the student believed that outcomes were contingent upon his efforts. An indication of external control would be a response which implied he saw little relationship between his efforts and events that affected him. The possible scores on the Nowicki-Strickland LOC scale range from zero (internal) to 40 (external).

This LOC scale has been reported as a reliable and stable instrument with internal consistency reliability of r = .68 for grades 6, 7 and 8 (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) and r = .65 for grade 6 (Halpin & Ottinger, 1983) and r = .59 for subjects in this study (Howerton et al., 1993). This sample of at-risk Black males was found to be more externally controlled than the normative sample of students in grades 6, 7 and 8 reported by Nowicki and Strickland (1973). However, the average locus of control of 16.45 (s=4.40) for subjects in the present study was consistent with the Payne and Payne (1989) study of at-risk elementary students.

Nowicki and Strickland identified two abbreviated LOC scales appropriate for grades three through six and for grades seven through 12 (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973; Lefcourt, 1991). Since the population under investigation in this study was students in grades 6, 7 and 8, the full LOC scale and both sub-scales were used in the analysis.

Self-esteem Inventory (SEI). The Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) was used to provide a global measure of self-esteem, ranging from zero (low self-esteem) to 100 (high self-esteem). Subjects were told there was no right or wrong answer and asked to indicate "like me" or "unlike me" to each question. The SEI is a 58-item questionnaire with five sub-scales: general self, social self-peers, home-parents, school-academic, and a lie scale. In this study, the 8-item lie scale was excluded from the analysis.

Reliability estimates of the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory range from $r = .87$ to $r = .92$ for grades four to eight (Coopersmith, 1981). Using an adapted scale, Zirkel and Gable (1977) reported test-retest reliability of $r = .86$ for Blacks. For the subjects in the present study, a coefficient alpha reliability of $r = .78$ has been reported (Howerton et al., 1992). Also reported were sub-scale reliabilities for general self ($r = .62$), social self-peers ($r = .05$), home-parents ($r = .43$), and school-academic ($r = .58$).

The SEI scores for this sample of at-risk adolescent Black males ranged from 38 to 96, with a mean of 63.0 and standard deviation of 12.75 (Howerton et al., 1992). Compared with normative data reported in the Coopersmith (1981) manual, this mean was similar to the mean of 64.6 ($s=14.2$) reported for a sample of 60 Black children in grades three to eight, but lower than the mean of 73.6 for 681 Black children aged eight to 14. By comparison, most of the students in the present study had lower self-esteem scores than the reference groups reported in the Coopersmith manual.

Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (VIQ). The Verbal Interaction Questionnaire was used to measure parental verbal interaction/abuse (Blake, 1991). Students were asked to respond to each of the 30 items with "often", "sometimes" or "never" to best describe the verbal communication they received from their parent(s)/guardian(s). The possible scores on the VIQ range from zero (negative verbal interaction) to 90 (positive verbal interaction).

For a sample of 197 southern, rural, predominantly white, male and female high school students, Blake (1991) reported a mean score of 63.39 ($s=18.21$) and median score of 68. Blake and Slate (1993) found a coefficient alpha reliability of $r = .94$ for this administration of the VIQ. This VIQ reliability compared favorably to the parent-child verbal aggression component of the Conflict Tactics Scales described by Straus (1979).

Procedure

Prior to administration of the LOC, SEI, and VIQ questionnaires, release forms were obtained from participants, parents, and school officials. Student anonymity was assured and maintained throughout the study. The three instruments were administered in one sitting where the school counselor read each item while the students followed and marked on their own forms.

Results

VIQ Findings

For these Black males, the coefficient alpha reliability estimate for VIQ was $r = .859$ and the mean score on the VIQ was 63.76 ($s=12.20$). These findings are consistent to those reported by Blake and Slate (1993) and Blake (1991). However, the median score of 63.17 here indicated that the scores were nearly symmetrical, whereas the median score of 68 indicated the VIQ scores in the Blake study were negatively skewed.

LOC and SEI Correlations

Table 1 shows the LOC and SEI full and subscale correlation matrix. A significant, moderate relationship ($r = -.423$, $p < .05$) was noted between the full-scale Nowicki-Strickland LOC and the full-scale Coopersmith SEI. Significant negative relationships were also noted between the full-scale LOC and two SEI subscales: general self and home parent. Both LOC

subscales for Grades 3-6 and Grades 7-12 had significant negative correlations with the SEI full-scale and all four SEI subscales.

Table 1

Correlations of SEI with LOC and VIQ for 42 At-risk Adolescent Black Males

		SEI Subscales			
LOC and VIQ Scales	SEI Full Scale	General Self	Self-Peers	Home-Parent	School Academic
LOC Full Scale	-.423*	-.408*	-.241	-.281*	-.250
Grades 3-6 Scale	-.501*	-.506*	-.258*	-.272*	-.322*
Grades 7-12 Scale	-.506*	-.487*	-.260*	-.295*	-.352*
VIQ Scale	.559*	.396*	.053	.616*	.516*

*$p < .05$

SEI and VIQ Correlations

A moderate relationship ($r = .559$, $p < .05$) was observed between scores on the full-scale Coopersmith SEI scale and the VIQ scale, as shown in Table 1. This finding is comparable to the relationship ($r = .63$) observed by Blake and Slate (1993). Moderate relationships with VIQ were also observed for three self-esteem sub-scales: general self, home parent, and school academic.

LOC and VIQ Correlations

No significant relationship was found between the full-scale Nowicki-Strickland LOC scale and the VIQ scale ($r = -.226$, $p > .05$), nor between the Grades 3-6 LOC subscale and the VIQ scale ($r = -.247$, $p > .05$). Only the abbreviated Grades 7-12 LOC scale was significantly related to the VIQ scale ($r = -.262$, $p < .05$).

LOC, SEI, and VIQ Multiple Correlations

In two of three regression analyses (LOC with SEI and VIQ; VIQ with SEI and LOC), multiple correlations of two variables with a third variable yielded no more than the respective bivariate correlations (LOC with SEI; VIQ with SEI). In the third regression analysis (SEI with VIQ and LOC), the $r = .559$ correlation between SEI and VIQ was significantly enhanced to $r = .636$ by the inclusion of LOC in the multiple correlation, $F(2,39) = 13.2714$, $p < .05$. Collectively, VIQ and LOC scores accounted for 40.5% of the variability of the SEI scores.

Discussion

For this sample of at-risk adolescent Black males, self-esteem and parental verbal interaction were most strongly related ($r = .559$), followed by locus of control and self-esteem ($r = -.506$), and locus of control and parental verbal interaction ($r = -.262$). In a multiple

relationship, locus of control contributed to the relationship of self-esteem with verbal interaction.

The moderate negative relationship between LOC and SEI implies that the students more internally controlled had higher self-esteem. This significant relationship ($r = -.42$, $p < .05$) contrasts with the non-significant relationship ($r = .03$, $p > .05$) reported by Holliday (1985) for Black elementary children. Similar significant relationships were noted for the LOC abbreviated scales and the SEI subscales.

Collectively, these relationships provide greater insight into the understanding of these at-risk adolescent Black males. Apparently, the at-risk adolescent Black males who assume more responsibility for what happens in their lives tend to feel better about themselves. Conversely, those who feel events in their lives are due to chance tend to feel worse about themselves. In general, students more internally controlled received more positive parental verbal communication; students more externally controlled received more negative parental verbal communication. Also, students with higher self-esteem perceived the communication from their parents to be more positive than did students with lower self-esteem.

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